MELVIN VANIMAN,--AERIAL ADVENTURER

By ISAAC RUSSELL.

The story of the dirigible balloon in America is not yet a great story, but it cannot be told without telling of Vaniman. Melvin Vaniman, balloonist, is a veritable embodiment of the American spirit.

. . . illogical, elate,
He greets th' embarrassed gods, nor fears
To shake the iron hand of Fate,
Or match with Destiny for beers.

When the end came of the ill-starred Wellman trans-atlantic air voyage and the America was lost, Vaniman was not only not daunted; he was not even abashed.

"No, I won't miss her," was his answer to sentimental inquiries concerning the lost airship. "When I was looking back at her from the deck of the Trent, I had another airship already in my mind—quite a different airship—and now that's what I'm going to build."

Characteristic of him, too, was the confident announcement of his plan for another airship; yet as he stood on the deck of the Trent and spoke those bold words, it must have seemed like a baseless boast, for he was practically penniless and all but friendless.

But the Akron has come as the fulfillment of Vaniman's prediction. Smiling as he stood beside her last week, Vaniman told me how she was all that his dream had been; how the new way he had figured out to solve the equilibrator problem was fully installed; how the trebling of the horsepower had been accomplished; how the lifting power of the gas bag had been strengthened; and how the rudders had been arranged for up-and-down as well as sidewise control, which the had alone last year.

The real reason there is another balloon this year, and, in fact, the reason why there was a balloon last year, is that Vaniman is an extraordinary man, a dreamer, and a practical mechanic, who has the faculty for putting his dreams into terms of steel, and a dogged loyalty to his vision that makes it easy to sacrifice all things else.

The Reason for His Dream.

The story of his years in America, in the Arctic, and in Europe makes it very plain why he is sticking to the dream of going overseas by airship. It is not for advertising that he is doing it, nor for glory; it is for that mysterious reason that no one has yet fully fathomed—the thing that drove the pioneers relentlessly over the next range of hills in front of them and started Peary to the Pole. Of course he comes of pioneer stock, and, almost equally of course—like the Wrights, like his prototype, Laughton O. Zigler, the inventor-hero of Kipling's South African story, "The Captive," and one may add, like most of our Presidents—he comes from Ohio. There he was born some forty odd years ago, in a little town just out of Springfield. His first ambition, curiously enough, was to be a singer. His first venture carried him into a Chicago opera company. The opera company went on a Western tour, crossed the Pacific, became plague-bound, and stranded in Honolulu, and the bent which has been the dominating one in Vaniman's career got its direction. For Vaniman had no ticket home, nor money to buy one, and, on account of the plague, could not have come even if he had. As he walked down one of Honolulu's main streets he saw a photograph gallery, went inside, got acquainted, and persuaded the photographer to lend him a camera. One day the photographer put some of Vaniman's pictures, out on view, and they make the populace stop and look.

As Vaniman worked in Honolulu he constantly studied his camera, and finally built a camera of his own design. With this he took pictures that attracted the attention of representatives of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, operating to various Oriental ports out of San Francisco, and led to a proposition that he go over all their routes and make views at every port. Vaniman insisted, as part of the terms, on a pass for a certain young lady all the way from a Middle Western town out to Honolulu, and a financial consideration sufficient to enable a young married couple to enjoy a circuitous honeymoon. The pass was furnished; the young woman came on from the Middle West; a Honolulu clergyman was called in, and Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Vaniman sailed for New Zealand and Australia.

It was in New Zealand that Vaniman began his ballooning career. A beautiful harbor had to be photographed and no commanding site was available from which to take it. The obliging steamship company commandeered an airship, and, after some painful misadventures (for Vaniman knew nothing about ballooning), he got his picture. It was a great success—so great that he began to specialize on captive-balloon photography. After incredible difficulties he managed to get a superb view of Sydney Harbor. He did Paris from an equally elevated vantage point, and even essayed the Eternal City.

Now, it is not easy to make negatives from a whirling and pitching air bag, and, moreover, there must be a convenient gas house near by to supply the ascending principle. After many troublous adventures, Vaniman conceived the idea of a dirigible balloon as the solution of his problem, and at once set about building one. He had but little money, and one does need money in such ventures. However, Mrs. Vaniman was game, so the courageous twain abandoned housekeeping and went to live in a little shed outside Paris, which was at once a workship, a living room, and house-of-my-dreams, where a giant dirigible soon began to take form. Here there came to visit him an American temporarily residing in Paris, who, both on his own account and through his son, the first flyer of the American army, has contributed very largely to the progress of aeronautics. Frank S. Lahm became Vaniman's friend, for he loved to shop-talk about balloons. One day Lahm told Vaniman about an advertisement inserted in some French papers by Walter Wellman, asking for designs for a dirigible balloon to be used in an attempt to reach the North Pole from Spitzbergen. Vaniman had an idea for a dirigible. He submitted it to Wellman; and thus it came about that his first two efforts to launch a dirigible baloon and cruise in it were made in the Arctic regions, with the North Pole as an objective point.

There have been many doubts expressed as to the seriousness of these Polar adventures. I had heard of them and laughed at them myself, but I got over it. The first thing that caught my eye at Atlantic City as I approached the balloon shed was a large canvas door built on the seaward side of the shed. It was no frail door or mere canvas covering. Great hawsers, such as the largest ocean steamers use in docking, stretched—more than a score of them—from various points in the canavs to heavy railroad rails anchored in the sand. On the inside the big canvas door was a network of heavy ropes, merely covered with canvas. Here was a door which practically could not blow in—built so that no wind that blew should budge it. There was something sincere about that particular piece of work. It kindled my interest. Until then I had not dreamed that any really serious transatlantic plans were forming.

Inside there were some rolls on the shed floor, and a rather short and stubby man was cutting them open with a pocketknife. He cut the last piece of twine that held one of the rolls and it opened, displaying folds of cloth—balloon cloth, as I afterward learned to know it.

"Isn't that fine?" the little man spoke up; "dry and as perfect as the day I wrapped it up, and that was over a year ago up in the Arctic. Not a speck of mold or a worn spot in it."

Overhead and about us in the big shed the lines of the America were then taking shape. The long steel car below the deck was to give it a low center of gravity, because the balloon used in the Arctic swung about too much; there were five different gas bags inside the main envelope because the balloon in the Arctic had stood on her nose one day when the gas suddenly ran to one end and the heavier air to the other; there was an equilibrator of steel cables and gasoline casks, because an equilibrator built of leather had torn itself free in the Arctic, and had wrecked the expedition only eigven hours out from the starting point.

While the storm of newspaper criticism was breaking over the Wellman-Vaniman expedition last year, and the America was not yet finished, I was daily at the balloon shed, week in and week out. And I had not the heart to say a word in criticism of one who was so hard at work; I never came to the shed so early that he was not there before me—and I often came down the ocean front for a sunrise walk—and I never lingered so long after dark as to outstay him. In those days I would see him one day worrying because a crank shaft trembled under the pull of the propeller, and the next day taking the whole shafting apart to see whether a new fashion of mounting it would overcome the difficulty.

The Success of the America.

How Vaniman and his associates worked away on the America until she was at last airworthy, and how they sailed away to break all world's records for time in the air and distance covered, everyone knows. Not everyone knows that to Vaniman belongs the credit for pushing the adventure of 1910 to its conclusion, and while the others who came back on the Trent were explaining the defeat, Vaniman was counting up the successes of the adventure; while they were condemning the famous equilibrator, he was declaring that without it they would never have gone anywhere, whereas with it they had broken all world's ballooning records. He had not faltered a whit in his faith in the dirigible. I knew then, as I talked to him coming up the bay, that he would be at it again, and that somehow a backer would be found.

During all last winter I kept hearing of new backers—indifferent backers who were in the game for advertising purposes; a committee from one town, a boomer and booster from another, showmen of Coney Island, and boards of trade of various inland cities.

Then I heard of one who was after Vaniman's own heart. He was rich; he could afford to lose his money, he wanted no advertising for himself or his business, and he wished the expedition to be named "The Vaniman Expedition" and the balloon Akron, after his home town.

When it was proposed that his trade mark be used as a figurehead for the airship, Mr. Welberling replied:

"I wouldn't cheapen myself and Mr. Vaniman by doing that. I backed the enterprise for myself personally because I wanted to. I shall not miss the money. When Mr. Vaniman came to me to ask how much I could build a balloon bag for, he had some backers. I saw they were putting obstacles in his way because they didn't understand him or his problem. I remembered the days when I was a boy with an idea about detachable rims. I recalled how I had had to fight and struggle and face opposition in a thousand forms. I had made a vow with myself in those days that if ever it became my privilege to help some one else who was fighting for an idea, so that his conflict with stupid people who could not understand would be lessened, I would step into the breach."

A Prediction.

So the Akron took shape just as Vaniman had dreamed of her in his heart while the America was chugging along above the Atlantic. And that is why Vaniman ended his second Atlantic City campaign with a good heart, in fine spirit, and with none of that worried, overwrought exhaustion in mind and body with which he stepped aboard the America in 1910, to pilot her out to sea. That is why he is as confident as ever of the vast future for it—full of faith in the coming dreadnoughts of the air, secure in the belief that the dirigible has far greater possibilities than the areoplane. His prediction is that we shall ship whole batteries of artillery—guns, men, and ammunition—aboard dirigibles, and drop them overnight where they are most needed.

The Lady Guardian (canvassing)—What a little darling! What are you going to call him?

The Voter—we thought ter call im Halbert, mum.

The Lady Guardian—Are you really? My 'usband's awfully keen on names beginning with an H. That's why we named ours 'Erbert.—Sketch.

SATISFACTORY.

"Are you satisfied with your new maid?"

"Very. She's too old to get married and too fat to wear my things. So I think we'll be able to keep her."